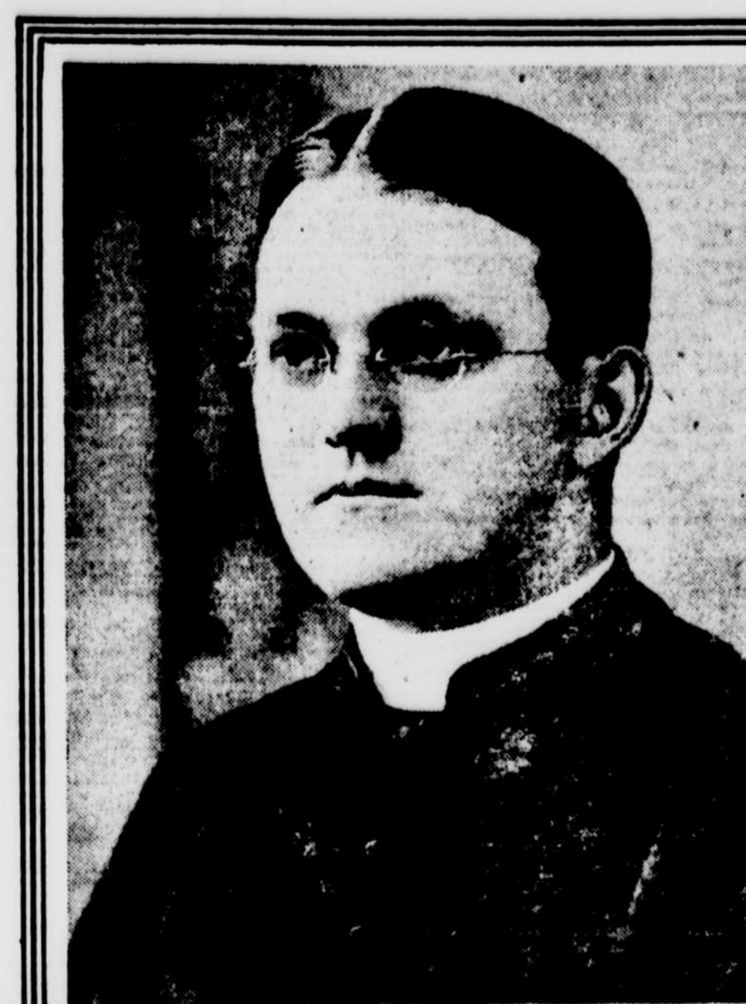
HERO PRIESTS OF THE WAR

By the REV. DR. PETER GUILDAY

FATHER JULES ALBERT BAISNEE, A HERO FROM BALTIMORE



The Rev. Dr. Peter Guilday.

WHEN that terrific flash of lightning came at Serajevo on June 28, 1914, in the assassination of Austria's heir, those who knew the international situation felt that Europe was doomed to war. With her quick Celtic instinct France realized that she was the one point toward which every eye in a neighboring country was turned.

The exciting days which passed between the end of June and the first of August were an enlightenment to the world at large, for France, and Christian France, awoke with a bound. Every religious quarrel in the land, every political enmity which had apparently become irreconcilable was obliterated in a moment, and the men and women of the nation, regardless of creed and party, stood shoulder to shoulder in a most sacred and indissoluble union of minds and hearts.

As in a vision, France saw her wondrous past and saw again her immortal destiny. Not only the French at home, but the persecuted exiles also, together with all her children living abroad, felt the impulse which surged like a giant wave from Calais to Marseilles.

Then occurred one of those most dramatic incidents of the war—the exiled priests and nuns of France rose up like the Israelites of old and the railroad stations along the frontiers were crowded with these her persecuted sons and daughters, who had forgotten all the injury done them and who were begging, pleading and beseeching for one boon only—to die in the cause of France!

What they have done since is written high in the annals of the country for the whole world to read. Not only those priests and nuns who were exiled but those who were living abroad, either as missionaries or as teachers, felt the same impulse, and one sentiment filled their hearts also—to brave death itself for the deliverance of their country.

Four or five years ago there came to St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, that old institution which has been training ecclesiastics since 1791, a young French priest from Normandy, who was sent to America to teach philosophy. For four years Jules Albert Baisnee labored among the Baltimore students, initiating them into the mysteries of logic and metaphysics, and when June, 1914, came and the academic year was closed he asked permission from his superiors to visit his parents, who were still living in France in the little Norman town of Briouze.

A pleasant vacation was in prospect. His own people and his friends were eager and anxious to hear about the wonderful cities of America, and he himself found great satisfaction in visiting the villages and the scenes of his boyhood. But the clouds of war were gathering, and on Saturday, August 1, 1914, the order came from Paris for the mobilization of the army. Father Baisnee belonged to the Seventeenth Regiment of Territorials, and when the news came to Briouze the young priest, whose highest ideal in his consecration to the religious state was obedience, obeyed at once.

In a way his position was unique. Although he had not taken out naturalization papers here in America, the French Government knew of his excellent work at Baltimore and would have been willing to allow him to return for the beginning of the academic year in September without obliging him to join the colors.

It would take the reader too far afield to explain the situation of the French clergy in the present war. One thing, however, ought to be clear. When it is asserted that about 50,000 priests and ecclesiastics are in the firing line of the French army it does not mean that all these are actually bearing arms. The law of 1889, which obliged universal service of three years from every young Frenchman over 20, contained an exception which gave a privilege to ecclesiastics to serve only one year in place of three. However, these priests were not obliged to enter the actual fighting, but were given posts in the medical corps and in the hospitals.

On Tuesday, the 4th of August, Father Baisnee left with the troops for Valognes, near Cherbourg, and on August 9 they had a field mass for which the whole division of 12,000 men turned out as a public prayer to God for success in the battle. Here they remained until the 27th, when orders came to leave for Havre.

In Havre itself Father Baisnee was struck with the remarkable religious fervor of this little harbor town and here he had his first glimpse of the war. One night toward dusk, with a victorious clarioning of horns, 300 Belgian automobiles filled with refugees fleeing from Namur came into the town. Their machines were actually shot full of holes and they were riding on the rims of their wheels, but they were in safety at last, and they wept with joy at the sight of the French soldiers.

Here, also, he saw the wonderful reception given to Cardinal Mercier by the French Government; and in the harbor his heart beat with pride every time he saw the Stars and Stripes floating from the Tennessee, which was then taking American refugees out of France. It would have been easy for him to have gained the same privilege, but he had pledged his word to the Captain of the division to stay with the men.

"I want a priest near my men if they are wounded or dying," the Captain had said, and Father Baisnee felt that here was his duty and here he stayed.

From Havre his regiment went to Dunkirk by boat and on October 8 they began the long march from Dunkirk to Ypres. The enemy was then nearing the city of Lille, and at Pilkem, beyond the Flemish city of Ypres, Father Baisnee's regiment occupied the trenches prepared for them by the English.

Here it was he heard for the first time the terrible boom of the cannons in the distance and the unearthly screech of the shrapnel. There was no sleep for the soldiers that night and in the realization of the danger that threatened them, one by one they came up in the darkness to Father Baisnee and to the other priests in order to put their souls at peace with their Maker.

As Father Baisnee told me, war brings forth not only the best that is in men but also the worst. It lets the barriers down and morality suffers in consequence. The soldiers were far away from their homes and the women of the towns through which they passed were without the moral support of their men folks. Only a strong hand could hold a check over the situation, and this is one of the things for which France must ever be grateful to her clergy. Strict military discipline is not sufficient in itself and the presence of the priest at the side of his men brings before them better than anything the reality of what is good and what is evil and helps them to be true to their better selves.

Father Baisnee belonged to the First Medical Corps, which had its post immediately behind the firing lines. His duties were to go out in search of the wounded with the other stretcher bearers and to give them the first aid necessary and then to carry them back to the hospital which was erected about a mile behind the trenches. Here on October 26 his medical post, which consisted of twelve stretcher bearers, four surgeons and himself, took up their quarters in an abandoned farmhouse, where they prepared beds for the wounded.

They knew that an attack was to be made by the enemy upon their lines that night, and after the battle had begun they were waiting for a lull in the firing in order to creep out to the trenches and carry back the wounded and dying men. Shortly after nightfall, while they were busy in this work, they were astonished by a shell which fell and exploded near the house, for the white flag they flew marked the place as a medical outpost. They thought it was merely an accident, but at regular intervals the shells began to drop around them.

Then they knew that their house was a target for the guns of the enemy. They decided to abandon the place, and they were making their way to the trenches to help the wounded when a shell fell in their midst and exploded.

Father Baisnee's thoughts were on the wounded in the trenches beyond them when the last shell came, and while trying to find his way to his men he suddenly felt a shock and the blood began to pour out of a wound in his arm. At this moment several cases of cartridges in the farmhouse too fire and began exploding, and it sounded as if the enemy were coming up from behind them. He hardly knew which way to turn, and in attempting to help one of the wounded men he realized that the wound in his arm was more serious than he imagined.

He abandoned his attempt to reach the trenches and he searched for a place of safety, where he examined his wound. It was too dark for him to see and it was imprudent to light a match. He stuffed all the bandanges he had into the wound in order to stop the bleeding and then stumbled along in the darkness, praying to God to direct him to the French lines. He was growing weaker with every step and was finally obliged to fling away his knapsack.

After an hour's search he came upon the French sentry, who gathered him into his arms as he fainted. A wagon was brought at once and he was carried to the nearest medical post, but they were using all the instruments, and it was quickly determined to take him to Ypres, about eight miles away. There an operation was performed on his arm, but the next morning the doctors decided to amputate the arm at the shoulder.

He was so weak from the loss of blood that no hope was held out for his recovery. After a few days of unconsciousness Father Baisnee awoke to find at his right and left two other wounded men, the Colonel and one of the Majors of his regiment. It was this latter officer who wrote to his people in Briouze and to Father Dyer, the president of St. Mary's, in Baltimore, to tell them of Father Baisnee's condition.

The next day the chaplain of the hospital came in and gravely told the young priest there was no chance for his recovery and then tearfully bade him good-by. His suffering was indescribable, and to add to the horror of the situation, on Friday, October 30, the enemy had advanced near enough to Ypres to begin the bombarding of the town.

Zeppelins flew over the city, dropping bombs right and left, and at each explosion Father Baisnee and the few brave nurses who remained in the hospital gave themselves up for lost. He lay on his bed and encouraged them to meet their fate like heroes. Realizing that to move him would cause his death, the nurses piled mattresses high up all around his bed in order to protect him from the exploding shells and then left him.

As he lay there, during that long night, expecting death at every moment, the scenes of the last four years of peace and happiness crowded upon him. He could see the stately building of St. Mary's, in Baltimore, and the streets and the people he never expected to witness again, and his students in the classroom looking up to him while he was lecturing; and with a pang of regret that life was over so soon for him, he resigned himself to the worst.

The bombardment ceased the next morning and he was removed with all care to a place of safety at Poperinghe, about ten miles away, and then to Rouen, where he arrived on Sunday, November 8. Here, thanks to the excellent attention he received, he began to mend. In January of this year he was able to leave his bed and to find his way about the town, visiting the wounded and comforting the homes from which fathers and brothers had gone to die on the field of battle.

About the middle of March he bravely presented himself again for service. The empty sleeve of his cassock pinned across his bosom was a sign of his devotion to France, but instead of accepting the valiant young hero's offer they pinned the War Cross of Honor on his breast and told him that France rejoiced in her hero and asked for nothing more.

To the reader who knows the Church's law on the matter one question will prompt itself immediately. How could he say mass? It must be remembered that any mutilation whatsoever of a grave nature unfits a priest of the Roman Catholic Church for the celebration of the divine service. When Father Jogues had his fingers chopped off by the Mohawks at Auriesville in 1642 he was obliged to appeal to Rome for a dispensation to celebrate mass with the stumps that remained.

Father Baisnee could not, therefore, celebrate mass with one hand unless he also obtained such a permission. In March his superiors in Paris wrote to the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XV., as follows:

"MOST HOLY FATHER: Jules Albert Baisnee, priest of the Society of Saint Sulpice, in the pursuit of his duty as military chaplain, whilst searching on the field of battle for the wounded, was struck by a shell, which injured his left arm so badly that it had to be amputated. He humbly begs your Holiness for permission to be allowed to say mass with his right hand. He intends to continue his work at the seminary in Baltimore and can there celebrate mass in a side chapel where no one will see him, and he can if necessary be assisted by a deacon."

The answer, which came in April, is as follows:

"In an audience held on April 20, 1915, before our Most Holy Father, Pope Benedict XV., the Cardinals of the Congregation of Religious presented the aforesaid petition, and his Holiness willingly grants the petition of Father Baisnee and allows him to say mass with his right hand, providing always that the greatest care be taken to preserve the dignity of the Holy Sacrifice.

"P. CARDINAL CAGIANO, Prefect."

Father Baisnee sailed for New York in September, 1915, and is now back at his old post as professor of philosophy, an object of esteem and an example of heroism to his pupils.

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CROKER TELLS THRILLING STORY OF JOHNNIE VAUGHN'S DARING RESCUE

Most rescues at fires are spectacular. The danger is necessarily great, the time is short, and daring and quick work is required of the firemen if the life in peril is to be saved. But few rescues in the history of the New York Fire Department have been more thrilling than the one described below by ex-Chief Croker.

By EDWARD F. CROKER.

THERE was something about Johnnie Vaughn of Fire Patrol No. 2 that made Fire Patrol No. 2 famous. It was the kind of fame that works like a chill—up the spinal column. Take a good, roaring, blazing fire, for instance, one where a dozen persons are trapped with no more apparent means of escape than a fly from fly paper, and see Fire Patrol No. 2 gallop up with Johnnie Vaughn singing the chorus of "Paradise Alley"—that was when the thrill came. And it was in just such situations that the fame of Fire Patrol No. 2 became the fame it was.

The boys of the neighborhood loved Patrol No. 2 and they loved Johnnie Vaughn. It was no wonder. He would tilt back in his chair on a spring evening and sing them songs or tell them stories or turn a back flip with as much agility as a hungry monkey going after a saucy squirrel.

Vaughn was a lithe, wiry young fellow of about 25 years. When he walked one was likely to think of the Fairies. When he ran up a scaling ladder one was almost sure to think of a streak of chain lightning. Vaughn was the sort who could go into a room where the smoke was something like midnight and walk blithely through the open door of an elevator shaft with nothing but air to stop a thirty or forty foot descent. Pretty soon Vaughn would come walking out of the basement area, saying contemptible things about the man who had left the elevator door open.

On such occasions a battalion chief would pat Vaughn on the back and say:

"Well, Little India Rubber, when you going to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge?"

And Vaughn would answer:

"When they're no more fires to fight."

Then Vaughn would laugh and the chief would laugh, for that was Vaughn's way of saying that life wouldn't be worth living outside the department.

The boys of Fire Patrol 2 had rigged up a makeshift gymnasium in their house where they spent idle moments tightening up loose muscle and vying with one another in a good natured way.

It was Johnnie Vaughn's specialty to leap onto the horizontal bar, slip off onto his heels and while thus suspended read the morning paper. If he became tired he would turn over and hang by his toes.

"What's the big idea, Johnny?" said one of the boys when he surprised him one day in this attitude.

"Oh, nothing in particular," Johnnie responded. "I just like it."

Then he threw the paper away and began swaying from side to side for all the world like the pendulum of a clock.

And there you have Johnnie Vaughn. There was a good deal of the animal in him, with an unusual allowance of pure man. He delighted in physical exertion for the sake of the exertion itself. And as is generally the way with such men he was extremely agile in all things which brought the body into play. To go a step further and be even more comprehensive, one might say, too, that he was extremely agile in all things which brought the heart into play, for Johnnie was nothing at all if he wasn't an out and out human.

One night—it was a night in the spring of 1890 or thereabout—the men of Fire Patrol 2 turned in at 11 o'clock. Like all firemen who possess a feline faculty for sleeping, they dosed off quickly and soundly and forgot the risks of their manner of livelihood just as a soldier, no doubt, forgets his when he falls asleep in the trench.

An alarm began to come in at precisely 1 o'clock. The gong rang out its rapid, sharp count and instantly all hands were awake. It was a two alarm blaze. A call went up from the lieutenant in the office. A bell clattered and rang noisily in the dormitory. The men rolled out of their cots, pulled on their clothes and took a running leap at the brass pole.

Already the horses were stamping in their places. For a few moments there was general confusion. Then there was general order. Then the doors of the house rolled back and Fire Patrol 2 bolted into the street.

Johnnie Vaughn was standing on a side runner, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and thinking about as little of the fire ahead as of the molecular theory.

In those days the old Hotel Royal reared a gloomy front on Bryant Park on the identical spot where the Cafe des Beaux Arts now presents a more blitheful aspect, that is, at the southeast corner of Fortieth street and Sixth avenue. The Hotel Royal was a six story structure, made for the most part of match wood. Just south of it, facing Sixth avenue, was a five story annex, also match wood, and just south of the annex was a four story building of tougher stuff which then housed an office of the Western Union Telegraph Company.

This setting is not drawn with any artistic intention. It's essential to an understanding of what happened later.

Shortly before the men of Fire Patrol No. 2 were roused from their slumbers a man occupying a second floor room in the main building of the Hotel Royal took a lighted cigar butt from his mouth and tossed it into a waste paper basket. As was natural, the paper caught fire. It burned up briskly and ignited some lace curtains. The curtains seized the blaze as a hungry shark might seize a plump flounder and right away there was a two alarm fire. Something of this sort is what quite frequently precedes a two alarm fire.

The hotel was well filled. Instantly the cry of "Fire!" travelled along the corridors and instantly doors opened and scantily clad individuals tore out of their rooms and down the stairs. The flames spread like the Marconi code, almost instantaneously, but for all that every one, at least such was the supposition, got out safely.

The men of the first engines arrived in time to bring a few women down on scaling ladders and to clear out the annex. No sooner had this been done than the flames took hold of the old structure in earnest and very soon there was not a second or third story window that was not belching forth fire and smoke.

"Nasty blaze," said the battalion chief on hand to a captain standing at his elbow.

"Yes, sir," said the captain, "and as hot a one as I ever saw."

It was a hot blaze, too. The glass windows of the buildings across Sixth avenue just melted up and dripped away.

"Lucky thing no one was caught, sir," commented the captain. "No show for 'em now."

"How's that?" said the chief somewhat abstractedly. He was peering up through the smoke at a fire escape balcony on the fifth floor of the annex.

"Hey, there!" went up a cry from further down the line. "Don't jump yet."

The chief bolted abruptly and left the captain wondering what had happened. He ran toward the annex. The same cry went up again. A fireman was calling:

"Wait till we get a net!" And then, as he ran back to meet a number of men coming forward with a net, "He'd dash his brains out in a second."

A solitary figure stood on the fire escape balcony of the fifth floor. Escape was cut off on all sides. The man's face could not be seen, but the waving of his arms could be. His voice was heard, but the words were inarticulate through the roaring of the blaze.

The clang of a new fire bell was heard. Fresh apparatus was coming up Sixth avenue. Through the din of the engines and the thunder of flames a voice was heard singing. It was singing the chorus of the new music hall hit, "Paradise Alley."

"Here comes Johnnie Vaughn or I'm a piker," said a fireman.

And it was Johnnie Vaughn. Not a fireman on the job could be mistaken about that. It was Fire Patrol No. 2.

Vaughn was the first one off the wagon and the first one in the melee. He come jogging into the midst of things as he always did at the critical moment. A glance was enough to show any fireman what the situation was. Half a glance showed Vaughn what it was. There was no hesitancy on his part.

"'Cuse me, chief," he said to the battalion chief, who by this time was directing the spreading of the net, "if you can hold that man from jumping for a minute I'll go up and pick him off from the roof."

The chief looked at the fire, which was rising with every second.

"But he's only got a few minutes, Vaughn, at the most. And how would you get there?"

"Leave that to me, sir. Just hold him for a few minutes."

And almost before he had finished speaking Vaughn was running to the entrance of the Western Union building. He disappeared in the doorway and two men disappeared with him.

The net was left limp on the street and the men made frantic signs to the trapped man not to jump. It was a gamble at best, but it was a good gamble. A five story leap into a net is a risky business. The man on the escape was pretty well crazed with fright, but as long as he had not jumped so far there was a good prospect that he had lost his nerve and could not jump even had they wanted him to.

"Hul-loa!" came a call from above.

It was Johnny Vaughn, standing on the cornice of the four story Western Union building and signalling down. The chief put a trumpet to his lips and shouted:

"Go ahead."

Vaughn's head disappeared. The chief had shouted "Go ahead!" but he had only the haziest notion of what Vaughn could do. It looked like a hopeless situation. The roof of the hotel annex was a good twenty feet above the Western Union building and eighteen feet at least above the fire escape balcony on which the man was standing.

There was a heavy cable running from the Western Union building to the roof of the hotel annex. It carrried telegraph wires. Vaughn took one look at it and decided that if it could carry wires it could carry him as well. He took a running leap and grabbed it with both hands. Then hand over hand he crawled up to the roof of the hotel annex. The two other men followed.

"Hul-loa!" came another cry from above and the men in the street with necks craned back beheld Vaughn and his two companions peering over the cornice.

Vaughn's next action showed very clearly that when he left the street on his madcap rescue he had no clear idea of what he was going to do once he had attained the hotel roof. But that was Vaughn's way of doing things. In this respect he was still a child who was led by instinct.

The men in the street saw Vaughn lie down on the cornice and reach down toward the trapped man.

"Not a chance in the world," said the chief. "He's fourteen feet shy if he's an inch. Boys, stretch the net."

The men picked up the net and brought it taut.

"Hold on!" came a cry from above.

It was Vaughn again. They looked up and beheld his entire body hanging down from the cornice. His companions were evidently sitting on his legs. But even then his finger tips were far out of possible reach of the man below. But Vaughn's position was enough to make the men slacken their grip of the net. They looked up, holding their breath every one, for there wasn't a man of them but expected to see him come toppling into the street the next second.

"Go back!" called the chief.

But Vaughn either did not hear or did not obey orders, for by degrees his body was dropped lower and lower until the whole man was visible hanging head down with his two companions holding on to one foot each. His hands were stretched downward to the utmost, but still they came four feet short of the man below.

It was impossible to overhear the conversation that ensued, but it was a prolonged one under the circumstances. Evidently Vaughn was trying to persuade the man to get up on the balcony railing, while the man, thoroughly unnerved, was hanging back. Meanwhile the flames were leaping steadily higher and the danger of the roof's falling in was becoming momentarily more imminent.

At last the man, evidently gaining confidence, put one foot on the railing and raised himself unsteadily.

"He'll fall," said the chief, "sure as fighting."

The second foot was raised to the railing and by degrees the man lifted himself to an upright position. He steadied himself and stretched up his hands. They fell short of reaching Vaughn's by four inches.

The man wabbled considerably and looked as if he would surely fall. Then through the roar of the fire came the single command from Vaughn:

"Jump!"

The man jumped upward. His hands fell into the iron grasp of Vaughn's hands and he hung suspended, his body writhing with fear.

Then the two bodies began to sway sideways like the pendulum of a clock. The two firemen on the cornice were balancing Vaughn first to one side and then to the other. Higher and higher the bodies went. The man's feet swung clear of the balcony railing on one side and then on the other. With each swing they went up a little and with each descent the legs of the victim doubled up and at half a glance it could be told that his body was fairly paralyzed with fright.

Higher and higher the pendulum swung.

"He can never do it," was the comment in the street. "It isn't within human power."

But the men who said that were reckoning with Vaughn. As the arc of their swaying became greater the strain with the descent naturally became heavier. But not once did the operation falter. Surely but slowly the body of that man was lifted higher into the air.

At last it came level with the edge of the cornice. The arc was marked once more. And then by a sudden, deft twist the body of that man was shot backward and over the edge of the cornice onto the roof.

Vaughn fell back, head down, his body wriggling in the air. But he was held fast. Then the men above began to raise him. A shout went up from the street. It was a shout of whole souled admiration for a brave act daringly performed.

Ten minutes later Vaughn stepped from the door of the Western Union building smiling. He had his man tight by the arm, perfectly sound and without a scratch on him. But never was there a more dazed individual. The man realized dimly apparently that few men have had narrower escapes. Vaughn slapped him on the back and told him in his good natured way to cheer up.

The poor fellow stretched out his hand to Vaughn. He knew at least who had saved his life. Vaughn took it and they shook heartily.